



Middle Grades Spotlight

A Periodical for California's Middle Grades Educators

Winter 2006

Theme

Student Support and Interventions

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A Message from the Superintendent

The California Department of Education is here to provide assistance and resources to you in your efforts to help your students gain the knowledge and skills they need to succeed. Student support and timely interventions are key to academic achievement. These efforts are the theme of this Winter 2006 periodical.

I am very pleased that overall student academic achievement in California is continuing to improve. Much of this improvement can be attributed to high-quality educators, coherent instructional frameworks, and standards-aligned instructional materials. One of our goals, however, is to also close the achievement gap that exists among students; for many of these students, closing the achievement gap requires more than academics. Supporting students' physical, social, emotional, and intellectual needs is essential.

Many of our culturally diverse, socioeconomically disadvantaged, English learner, and special education populations require extra help from the school to become academically successful. In addition, students in middle school need specialized help to navigate the uncertainty of early adolescence, make the right choices, stay in school, and prepare for postsecondary work and school.

The California Department of Education recognizes the need for learning support and offers specialized programs to assist with these needs. Some of the best approaches, however, are strategies and personalized relationships that are homegrown by local communities.

I applaud the teachers, counselors, administrators, community agency staff, and volunteers throughout California who spend countless hours developing caring relationships with students and taking the time to assess what additional services students need to succeed in school

and prepare for future careers. I congratulate our 2005 Schools to Watch—Bernice Ayer Middle School, J. F. Kennedy Middle School, Millikan Middle School, and Rancho Milpitas Middle School—and extend a special thank you to the school staff members who agreed to be interviewed for this issue. I appreciate your diligence in meeting the needs of students and your willingness to share your experiences.

JACK O'CONNELL

Prevention and Intervention Strategies Support All Students

In California, a wide variety of prevention and intervention strategies are aimed at supporting students. Appropriate preventative measures should always be the first strategy in minimizing and possibly eliminating the need for interventions later. If and when a student does struggle, it is imperative to recognize problems immediately and to employ effective interventions to get the student back on track.

Although there is always some overlap, prevention and intervention strategies generally can be categorized as cognitive and noncognitive. Cognitive preventions and interventions are those that directly assist a student in the acquisition of academic learning. (These typically include curriculum, instruction by qualified teachers, standards-aligned instructional materials, aligned assessment,

“Cognitive preventions and interventions are those that directly assist a student in the acquisition of academic learning.”

intervention instructional materials, additional class periods, study skills classes, and standards-based career and technical classes). Results from cognitive prevention and intervention are more easily measured and are directly correlated with student achievement.

There are also noncognitive preventions and interventions that are less direct but, nonetheless, important supports for student academic achievement. Without physical, emotional, social, and intellectual support, most adolescents and particularly higher-risk adolescents will not make the gains educators expect. These interventions are more difficult to correlate with

test scores; usually, other indicators of success are used, such as attendance rates, dropout data, discipline and expulsion data, and counseling referrals. Noncognitive interventions include a range of programs and strategies that keep students healthy, safe, and engaged in learning, such as youth development, character education, attendance and dropout prevention programs; nutrition, anti-bullying, service-learning, and before-and-after-school programs; and interest-based electives, including visual and performing arts, physical education, and advisories.

Cognitive Interventions

The No Child Left Behind Act and California’s Academic Performance Index (API) both focus on the achievement of significant subgroups and the closing of achievement gaps. Schools that consistently fail to make their growth targets by either measure are subject to state and federal sanctions. The California State Board of Education has endorsed nine Essential Program Components for each grade span (elementary, middle, high) as cognitive interventions for schools with students who are struggling to meet academic targets in English-language arts and mathematics.

Interventions are divided into three groups:

- Benchmark interventions* are intended for students who are satisfactorily achieving grade-level standards but on occasion may require additional assistance and support for specific

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* Benchmark interventions are discussed in the *Reading/Language Arts Framework* but are not included in the Essential Program Components Academic Program Surveys.

standards and concepts. These students would benefit from ancillary materials, tutoring, software assistance, additional time with the teacher, and differentiated instruction. Without this support they could fall behind and fail to score at the proficient level on statewide tests.

- Strategic interventions are intended for (1) middle grade students who are one to two years below grade-level expectations; and (2) high school students who are at or above the sixth-grade standards in English-language arts but are not able to pass the *California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE)* and high school students who are unable to demonstrate proficiency in Algebra I or are at risk of failing the mathematics portion of the *CAHSEE*.
- Intensive interventions are intended for middle grade students who are more than two years below grade-level expectations and for high school students who are unable to demonstrate proficiency in the sixth-grade standards in English-language arts or are unable to demonstrate proficiency in the seventh-grade standards in mathematics. These students have the greatest need.

For more information on the Essential Program Components, visit <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/lp/vl/essentialcomp.asp>.

Prior to needing academic interventions, students may benefit from positive support. Creating a college-going culture at middle school and at high school provides both cognitive and noncognitive support to adolescents and their families as they strive for higher education. There are specific programs designed to foster college preparedness such as GEAR-UP at <http://www.castategearup.org/> and AVID at <http://www.avidonline.org/>. These programs, along with others, can be found on the Academic Preparation Programs Research Information System (APPRIS) database at <http://www.appris.org/>. The APPRIS system provides an accurate, up-to-date snapshot of the myriad programs whose purpose it is to prepare California's kindergarten through twelfth grade students for higher education.

“Noncognitive interventions include a range of programs and strategies that keep students healthy, safe, and engaged in learning.”

Noncognitive Interventions

Getting Results Update 5—a new publication from the California Department of Education—reviewed research articles published in respected professional journals that showed evidence of a link between student health and academic achievement. The study also explored the relationship between the health of California students and the state's accountability model, the API. Schools with a lower API reported a relatively large number of students with problems such as substance abuse, being threatened or injured, and being charged with weapons possession. Schools with higher API scores had higher percentages of students who were physically active, had good diets, and felt safe at school.

The California Department of Education Web site has information on numerous student support and intervention programs. See “Worth a Click” on page 22.

Student Support and Interventions—What Works?

Secondary students share many similarities in what they need for a successful school experience. Research indicates that there are key components to increasing levels of student achievement: committed teaching staffs; visionary leadership; collegial decision-making; an inviting, safe school environment; high student expectations; and an active engagement in learning. These learning supports are critical at both the middle and high school levels and are recognized by programs such as *Schools to Watch*, *Distinguished Schools*, and the new *Call to Action* by the National High School Alliance.

Another important characteristic of successful schools is what is referred to as *connectedness*. Study after study indicates that when students are connected to learning and to relationships with peers and adults, they are less disruptive and more successful in academics. Phrases such as student support, asset development, interventions, developmental responsiveness, or school climate are “code” for talking about the importance of creating school communities that connect students to caring adults and to motivational teachers. Educators have known about these concepts for years and are now asking themselves, “What is working?”

Robert Blum makes “A Case for School Connectedness” in the April 2005 issue of *Educational Leadership: The Adolescent Learner*. Blum states:

In this era of accountability and standards, school connectedness can seem like a soft approach to school improvement. It can, however, have a substantial impact on the measures of student achievement for which schools are currently being held accountable (p.16).

To study the relationship between academic success and school connectedness, Blum convened a conference of researchers. From their findings he synthesized three school characteristics that connect students and encourage their academic achievement:

1. High academic standards that are delivered by supportive teachers
2. A school environment that reflects adult and student relationships that are positive and respectful
3. A school environment that is both physically and emotionally safe

Research also shows that students who **feel** connected to school are “less likely to use substances, exhibit emotional distress, demonstrate violent or deviant behavior, experience suicide ... and become pregnant” (ibid, p.17). Blum goes on to say that connected students are less likely to skip school or be involved in fighting, bullying, and vandalism—all behaviors that cost schools financially as well as academically.

“Study after study indicates that when students are connected to learning and to relationships with peers and adults, they are less disruptive and more successful in academics.”

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Unsafe schools (characterized by bullying, teasing, fights, cliques, and chaos), as well as classrooms staffed with teachers who demonstrate poor management skills, tend to be schools where students feel disconnected.

Consistent rules and zero tolerance policies tend to support school connectedness, but they do not succeed without caring teachers. Blum's research suggests that classroom **culture** appears to influence connectedness more so than class size. Connectedness happens when teachers create high expectations for behavior and performance in a democratically organized, fun learning environment that celebrates successes large and small. In addition, when the school administration supports high expectations for success by calling home every time a student misses school, students start getting the message that the school staff expects **every** child to succeed. No child is expendable.

The conclusions come as no surprise to school climate advocates and are summarized in the following list compiled by the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine in *Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Students' Motivation to Learn* (Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2004 p.19; available online at <http://www.nap.edu/books/0309084350/html/>):

Key Components to Increasing Levels of Student Achievement

- Avoid separating students onto vocational or college tracks.
- Set high academic standards for all students and provide all students with the same core curriculum.
- Limit the size of the school to create small learning environments.
- Form multidisciplinary education teams in which groups of teachers work with students.
- Ensure that every student has an advisor.
- Provide mentorship programs.
- Ensure that course content is relevant to the lives of students.
- Provide service-learning and community service projects.
- Provide experiential, hands-on learning opportunities.
- Use a wide variety of instructional methods and technologies.
- Extend the class period, school day, and/or school year.
- Provide opportunities for students who are falling behind to catch up.

What Works from the Students' Perspectives?

In a separate article titled "Student Perceptions of Action, Relevance, and Pace" (*Middle School Journal*, March 2005), Penny Bishop and Susanna Pflaum summarize their research about how to measure middle school students' engagement in learning. They used student interviews and drawings to gain an understanding of what does—and what does not—engage students.

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The obvious outcome of this study is that these middle school students value active approaches to studying relevant curriculum at their own pace. Additionally, collaboration, technology, and choice weave throughout these learning opportunities in compelling ways to enhance student engagement. Less obvious, yet perhaps more important, is inviting middle level learners into the dialogue about learning (p.10).

It is not surprising that **active learning** engages adolescents. The authors quoted Duckworth's 1996 findings that "Learners come to understanding by being placed in a situation where they develop that understanding, as opposed to being told what they ought to understand."

Another predictable finding based on prior research was that students were much more engaged in projects that were **relevant** to them (Sherer 2002). These projects often involved collaboration with peers, lively discussions, and the use of technology. However, the authors also noted a 1995 National Middle School Association advisory that stated, "Making curriculum relevant does not mean limiting content solely to students' pre-existing interests. Challenging curriculum creates new interests; it opens doors to new knowledge and opportunities; it 'stretches' students" (p. 21).

Finally—and, perhaps most problematical—was students' awareness that learning needed to happen at their own **pace**. One student drew a picture of his head on his desk: "Very mad and bored because ... it just takes so long to go over and over and over again. But then after we get that done and I'm like, 'Whew, we're done after, like, a half hour explaining.' But then we do another half hour because he [pointing to another student] doesn't know how to do, like, two to the tenth power" (p. 9).

The authors conclude, "Students value active approaches to studying relevant curriculum at their own pace." In addition, one particularly invaluable student support—that of **hearing** and **respecting** the student—provides a model for how to juggle the needs of 30-plus adolescents in any given class. Give students respect by showing that their perceptions matter, and check in often to make personal connections among people and with the content being taught.

References

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"The challenge to middle schools to provide a caring adult relationship for all students remains a high priority and must be continually reinforced through deliberate planning."

—From *Taking Center Stage*, Chapter 6: Creating a School Culture to Sustain Standards-Based Education, p. 115.
<http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/mg/tcs.asp>

J. F. Kennedy Middle School—A Caring Environment Forms the Foundation for Student Achievement

**J. F. Kennedy Middle School
Imperial County
El Centro Elementary District
900 N. Sixth Street
El Centro, California
Renato Montaña, Principal
Phone: (760) 352-0444
2005 School Profile**

Community: **Rural**

Enrollment: **771**

Student Demographics:

- **1.4%** African American not Hispanic
- **0.0%** American Indian or Alaska Native
- **0.4%** Asian
- **0.0%** Filipino
- **96.1%** Hispanic/Latino
- **0.0%** Pacific Islander
- **2.1%** White not Hispanic
- **0.0%** Other

Grade Levels: **6-8**

2005 **API: 657** (up 75 points since 2001-02)

2005 **AYP: No***

Free/Reduced Lunch: **92%**

English Learners: **48%**

* School met 16 of its 17 adequate yearly progress (AYP) criteria.

J. F. Kennedy Middle School (KMS) is one of four middle schools designated as winners of California's "Schools to Watch—Taking Center Stage" award in 2005. The school rose to distinction by serving its high-poverty, largely Spanish-speaking community as a family where parents, students, teachers, support staff, and management are all interconnected.

Personalized Environment, Student Voice, and Citizenship

A daily advisory period is one of the key strategies that help create a caring family atmosphere at KMS. At the beginning of each day, students meet for 37 minutes with the same teachers and peers who are also in their first-period academic class. Although the advisory class serves several functions, one of the main goals is to give students and parents one teacher who knows them well (as a result of having two periods per day with each student) and who is the advocate for each of the students in that class. For example, the advisory class teacher is the one designated to meet with parents during parent-teacher conferences and is the person to contact when parents have a concern about their child. Through both departmental and grade-level team meetings, other teachers share information about particular students so that the advisory teacher can give parents information about all subject areas affecting their children.

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The advisory period also serves as a place to discuss character education and current hot topics (such as the death of someone in the student community) and practice sustained silent reading and high-frequency words. The school hosts competitions between the advisory class teams on high-frequency word lists to generate excitement. A traveling trophy goes to the class, by grade level, that wins. Students work hard for their class to win the competition.

Staff development on building a caring community in the school is implemented in two ways. First, new teachers meet with the principal (a former counselor) and learn how to guide students toward drawing their own conclusions about their behavior and the choices they make. New teachers learn the approach is to guide rather than punish. Second, whenever teachers are discussing a discipline problem, they have learned to ask each other, “How would you want *your* child to be treated in this situation?” The result is invariably more compassionate and thoughtful than the first-impulse response would have been.

Another strategy that helps students feel support is the practice of a cool-down period. Teachers make an agreement to accept another teacher’s student when the student presents a note from the core teacher who is having difficulty instilling self-discipline. Usually a 5- to 10-minute “cool-down” period helps both the student and the teacher avoid a potentially harmful blowup.

Comprehensive Services and Interventions

An extended day of block scheduling gives students additional academic support. English, math, social studies, and science are offered after school using supplemental service funds to compensate the teachers. Rather than being coerced into attending classes, students are counseled to understand the importance of an education and knowledge. “Knowledge is power” is one class’s motto.

The block schedule rotates periods one, two, and three on Tuesdays and four, five, and six on Wednesdays. Because the last class of the day has a three-hour block (with the last hour occurring after school), teachers can allow students who are proficient in the subject to leave one hour before the students with Below Basic scores. As a result, teachers have a smaller class for the final hour and can focus on intensive interventions during that time. The rotating schedule ensures that each teacher will have an opportunity to keep low-performing students after school for their subject area.

On block schedule days, the physical education (PE) class is much longer than required. On those days, the computer teacher pulls low-performing math students from PE after the first hour and gives them intensive math intervention through specific software programs.

Students who are Far Below Basic on test scores are placed in a class that provides three hours per day of intensive reading intervention, two hours of math, and one hour of PE.

The largely Spanish-speaking parent population has also benefited from interventions at the school. Using the Lee Cantor program, *Homework Without Tears*, parents received a six-week course on how to help their children with homework. An additional 117 parents received help through GEAR UP



Science and other subjects are offered after school to give students extra academic support.

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(Gaining Early Academic Awareness Through Undergraduate Programs) and the Parent Institute for Quality Education. Data showed that GEAR UP participation had a positive impact on student achievement.

Finally, teachers provide grade-level course work that meets state standards and is rigorous and challenging to **all** students. The staff members believe that this rigid adherence to high standards for all students helps to end the achievement gap, especially since so many other intervention strategies are in place. Teachers analyze anonymous lesson plans so they have a standard assessment of what constitutes a grade-level lesson. When a lesson does not meet grade-level standards, teachers brainstorm together on how to raise the level. PowerPoint lessons are shared within grade levels and departments to strengthen the lesson delivery and increase the level of student engagement.

Age-Appropriate Cocurricular Activities

The school offers traditional sports activities in addition to a wide variety of after-school activities and clubs. Some classes offered in the past include flag and drill team, marching band, hip-hop dance, art, guitar, and other enrichment classes. There are monthly dances and frequent, student-led assemblies. Whenever possible, school staff invites community volunteers to offer enrichment classes during the staff planning on late start days (every Monday). The principal and associated student body also organize checker tournaments and other fun activities during lunch periods to engage the students in community activities.

Challenges for Staff

KMS serves a population of parents who have not experienced success in education, do not speak the language of the school, and culturally do not feel empowered to ask for anything from the school. To reach the parents, the school has changed the mindset of the students. Instead of punishing students for not completing homework, the school staff members are trying to find ways to give

“Using praise while acknowledging difficulties has helped the school staff to undo negative feelings about school and grades.”

students a feeling of success in meeting challenges. Using praise while acknowledging difficulties has helped the school staff to undo negative feelings about school and grades. The goal is to help both students and parents understand the reason *why* school is important instead of feeling that there is a punishment waiting to meet their efforts.

In the past, before the school culture was firmly established, there were occasions when teachers complained about the after-school responsibilities. However, by building the expectation for after-school work into the interview process and by identifying financial rewards for the extra work, the school has assembled a staff that is passionately committed to student success.

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Benefits to Students

Students like being at KMS. The atmosphere of trust and respect that is generated through the emphasis on close student-adult relationships has resulted in a dramatic reduction of discipline referrals. There has been a 50 percent reduction in suspensions, and there were no expulsions in the past year. Even when students make a mistake, they know that the school staff cares for them and will do everything possible to get them back on track. In addition, the students trust the adults because the staff members have modeled a practice of honesty—even in admitting their own mistakes. Students understand it is okay to make a mistake, own up to it, and try not to make the same mistake again. They learn the benefit of being known as one who can honestly admit mistakes rather than one who tries to hide mistakes and thus become known as a liar—hurting their potential future with both teachers and peers.

A recent tragedy shows the power of the school's caring family atmosphere. Two friends—both KMS students—were in a car accident with one of the girl's parents. Both girls survived, but the father and pregnant mother died at the scene, forcing the girls to walk a mile to get assistance. In spite of their enormous grief, both girls came to school the next day—it was their family.

In short, the family atmosphere of the school gives students a safe haven where they can talk about issues of concern with adults who care.

Suzanne Smith served as school principal at the time of KMS's "Schools to Watch-Taking Center Stage" award. Her new contact information is (760) 572-0222 at San Pasqual Valley Unified School District, 676 Baseline Road, Winterhaven, California 92283, where she is serving as superintendent. The current principal of KMS is Renato Montaña.

Rancho Milpitas Middle School—A School Dedicated to Student Success

Rancho Milpitas Middle School

**Santa Clara County
Milpitas Unified District
1915 Yellowstone Avenue
Milpitas, California
Michael Madalinski, Principal
Phone: (408) 945-5561
2005 School Profile**

Community: **Urban**

Enrollment: **693**

Student Demographics:

Grade Levels: **7-8**

2005 **API: 766** (up 48 points since 2001-02)

2005 **AYP: No***

- **4.6%** African American not Hispanic
 - **0.6%** American Indian or Alaska Native
 - **32.3%** Asian
 - **19.3%** Filipino
 - **26.8%** Hispanic or Latino
 - **1.4%** Pacific Islander
 - **13.4%** White not Hispanic
 - **1.4%** Other
- Free/Reduced Lunch: **48%**
English Learners: **20.2%**

* School met 24 of its 25 adequate yearly progress (AYP) criteria.

Rancho Milpitas Middle School—A Distinguished School to Watch

Rancho Milpitas Middle School (RMMS) has been recognized as both a California Distinguished School and a School to Watch. These impressive awards recognize a staff that is dedicated to student success. In addition, Principal Mike Madalinski was honored as the Association of California School Administrators Middle School Principal of the Year for 2004-05.

So what do these awards mean in terms of student support and intervention? Using *Schools to Watch—Taking Center Stage* as a guide, the school reflected on Component 3—Developmental Responsiveness. Responsiveness comprises the following aspects.

Personalized Environment, Student Voice, and Citizenship

The school instituted an advisory class that is 20 minutes long, four days per week (on Wednesdays, the school day is shortened to facilitate staff collaborative planning, so the school does not hold the advisory class that day). To keep each of the advisory classes small (about 21 students), the principal

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and vice principal each lead one of the sections. Staff members may choose to stay with advisory students as they move from seventh to eighth grade or lead an advisory class at a specific grade level year after year. The second option ensures a staff member will assist advisory students that are also served by the staff member's grade-level team.

The advisory period begins with daily video announcements that are produced by students in the elective video technology class. The announcements are student-led; therefore, they raise hot topics such as community events, dances, bullying, dating relationships, family dynamics, self-concept, and substance abuse. The advisory class discussions that grow from the announcements provide a schoolwide forum to help staff understand issues affecting the students. The discussions also help students share creative solutions to common concerns.

The students and staff are positive about the advisory class because it helps them establish nontraditional bonds between adults and students and among peers. Students feel that they are valued because adults take time to listen to their opinions on a wide variety of topics. It is a win-win situation because the staff enjoys hearing what the students feel about those topics.

To help the primarily middle-class staff understand the highly diverse student population, staff discussions have often focused on research about culturally proficient teaching (see Staff Development Resources at the end of this article) and building a culture of responsiveness. In addition, a resource binder from the National Middle School Association called *Treasure Chest: A Teacher Advisory Source Book* helps teachers find advisory class topics in the rare event when student announcements do not spark a discussion.

As a result of the closer bonds between students and adults, classroom referrals have dropped dramatically in the three years since the advisory classes were started. The program has become so popular that this year no one wanted to hold the annual vote about whether or not to keep it. That is in stark contrast to the year when planning for the program started, and staff members expressed a lot of concern about how it would work and whether it would be valuable.



Comprehensive Services and Interventions

The school employs one full-time counselor to help students deal with the social and emotional issues that interfere with their academic success. In addition, the district has provided funds for a part-time marriage-family therapist who works 20 hours per week on campus. She has been instrumental in helping several students through suicidal thoughts and other crises.

Teachers bring in-depth knowledge of students to their advisory class.

The students also receive much intervention support due to the team structure of the school. Grade-level teams of teachers follow one group of students for an entire year, getting to know each student. They bring in-depth knowledge of the students to their advisory class. As a result, faculty members notice changes in student attitude or behaviors and are able to quickly involve family and/or community service agencies to help students deal with problems.

Teachers have also developed an informal mentor network to watch out for particular students. As a result, none of the students "fall through the cracks"; someone is always watching out for them.

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Teachers who serve as advisers to student clubs have also been instrumental in connecting parents to social services through club activities such as La Raza.

Age-Appropriate Cocurricular Activities

Teachers advise a variety of clubs, many of which in turn sponsor activities for the students. As an example, the Latino Student Club hosted dances and community events that raised enough money to send 21 students to Santa Barbara for a La Raza festival.

Physical fitness is a schoolwide focus that has resulted in exceptionally high scores on the school's seventh-grade fitness test. The physical education department focuses on lifelong health rather than star athletics and begins every Monday with a "fitness focus" paper that covers topics such as cardiovascular fitness, proper diet, and avoiding addictions.



The physical education department focuses on lifelong health rather than star athletics.

Challenges for Staff

One of the biggest challenges the RMMS staff faces is the need to stay fresh. The emotional intensity of their advisory role and team interaction with the students leaves many staff members feeling burned out toward the end of the year.

Closing the achievement gap is also a continuing challenge. For example, when analyzing disappointing test results, staff members remind one another that *all* students can succeed, and the teacher's job is to find out what will help to make that happen.

“Knowing that adolescents have a passionate commitment to ‘fairness,’ the staff members have used every opportunity they have to listen to students about things that will improve the school.”

Another continuing challenge for RMMS is one facing all schools: how to finance important programs when funding ends. For example, the school counselor has been critical to the success of the advisory program, but district funding ended for the program in June 2005. The school is working to identify alternative funding sources to reinstitute the counseling position. The knowledge that adolescents need to experience multisensory learning modalities makes the staff committed to maintaining their elective classes.

Benefits to Students

The main benefit to students at RMMS is that they have a voice in the ownership of the school. Knowing that adolescents have a passionate commitment to

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“fairness,” the staff members have used every opportunity to listen to students about things that will improve the school. When students see their suggestions being implemented, they feel valued. The students also feel appreciated and “known” because of the positive adult-student relationships on campus.

They also enjoy learning in a safe and caring environment. For example, recently when a TV reporter came to spotlight the newly distinguished school, she commented on how amazed she was to walk into a classroom that was showing the film *Glory* and to see the students taking notes. It was obviously an engaging intellectual activity rather than a chance to “kick back.”

In addition, the informal mentor relationships that teachers have with their students help to make the learning more personal; and the team awareness of how each student is doing ensures that none of the students “fall through the cracks.” Teachers notice emotional, social, and academic problems before they become severe. Needed resources can be obtained as soon as possible.

Staff Development Resources

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Bernice Ayer Middle School—Providing Student Support Enhances Achievement

Bernice Ayer Middle School
Orange County
Capistrano Unified School District
1271 Sarmentoso
San Clemente, California
Cheryl Baughn, Principal
Phone: (949) 366-9607
2005 School Profile

Community: **Urban**

Enrollment: **712**

Student Demographics:

- **0.6%** African American not Hispanic
- **0.3%** American Indian or Alaska Native
- **1.0%** Asian
- **1.1%** Filipino
- **25.6%** Hispanic/Latino
- **0.1%** Pacific Islander
- **69.9%** White
- **1.4%** Other

Grade Levels: **6-8**

2005 **API: 813 (up 48 points since 2001-02)**

2005 **AYP: No***

Free/Reduced Lunch: **20%**

English Learners: **16%**

* School met 20 of its 21 adequate yearly progress (AYP) criteria.

Personalized Environment, Student Voice, and Citizenship

As a recipient of the “Schools to Watch—Taking Center Stage” award in 2004, Bernice Ayer Middle School (BAMS) has a cutting-edge academic program that focuses on content and performance standards. BAMS is also a 2001 Distinguished School that now has an API of 813 while serving a population in which 20 percent of the families live in poverty and 16 percent are English learners. BAMS’ API growth of 48 points over the past four years indicates a winning strategy.

How does a middle school that serves two distinct feeder schools—one largely Caucasian and middle class and the other largely Hispanic and low-income—meld the diverse student population into a cohesive family unit? The staff at BAMS is committed to providing time for teacher collaboration, maintaining high expectations for all students, and establishing and maintaining community partnerships. The result is a school with the highest attendance rate in the district for two consecutive years.

Students like to come to BAMS for a variety of reasons. New students get a campus tour and several lunch dates with members of the Peer Assistance Leadership (PAL) class to help them connect to the

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school. Another reason that students are happy to attend BAMS is that students are known and have a voice. Each student is paired with an **invisible mentor** (staff member) whose identity is concealed and who sends weekly letters and small gifts. Student members of the PAL class serve as mail carriers to deliver letters between the mentors and the students. The identity of the mentor is revealed at an end-of-year luncheon.

Student-produced “Breaker News” casts start each day, and there are frequent student-created short feature films that highlight student concerns. Thanks to the team approach, the writing prompts throughout the school year allow students to express their opinions and take a stand on issues. In addition, once a month students can sign up to attend “Popcorn with the Principal” sessions during sustained silent reading. These sessions mirror the “Coffee with the Principal” sessions parents are invited to attend. Students from all academic levels attend the sessions with the principal and often help her answer questions from their peers. For example, when seventh graders suggest that less work would make the school better, eighth graders tell them the realities of preparing for high school!



Students can sign up to attend “Popcorn with the Principal.”

There are also many fun activities that personalize the campus and help students bond to peers and to the adults. Lunch hours are devoted to jousting tournaments with Associated Student Body (ASB) announcers. There are also paper plane contests, chess games, and pie-throwing contests (with teachers as the “willing” targets)—all events are open to all students.

The fun is well balanced with a wide variety of opportunities for students to learn citizenship skills through community service. Three programs help to introduce students to community service: the Kiwanis-led Builders Club meets during lunch; the ASB and PAL class organize beach clean-ups, service projects in the community, and fundraising drives.

Comprehensive Services and Interventions

Many interventions serve the ethnically and linguistically diverse families of BAMS students. For example, a bilingual counselor works with the school district’s Family Resource Center to refer families in need of special services. On-site counseling and home visits also support families. Students can attend anger management, asset building, positive power, and weight management groups on campus. PAL students are trained to conduct conflict mediation to resolve student disagreements. In 2004 BAMS implemented a Voluntary Drug Testing Program for seventh and eighth graders, and over 45 percent signed up for the program.

During monthly grade-level meetings, teachers discuss students who are academically, socially, or emotionally at risk and identify interventions to assist those students. The Student Review Team (administrators, counselors, and team leaders) take the notes from each grade-level team meeting and compile a database to keep track of all interventions, test results, and grades for each at-risk student. Records are frequently reviewed to ensure that no students slip through the cracks.

To keep parents informed, the school sends all school news in a bilingual format as well as Listserv e-mail messages that provide helpful parenting information. There are also BAMS and Parent/Teacher/Student Association Web sites and newsletters, a Homework Hotline, Internet access to students’ grades, and a School Notebook column in the local newspaper.

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The school hosts monthly English Language Advisory Council meetings to help bilingual parents understand the school and voice concerns. The council members include parents, students, teachers, and administrators. One project sponsored by the Council was a Tech Boot Camp designed to help parents gain computer literacy and learn how to access student grades online. The council organized a computer donation program so that graduates of the boot camp received a home computer system.

To reinforce the school motto that it is “Safe to be Smart,” there are several on-campus academic interventions that help students who are struggling to succeed.

- The Homework Club meets two days per week after school, and transportation is provided for those who need it. Tutors from the high school join professional tutors and volunteers from the teaching staff to help the students catch up on work missed due to absence. The school provides materials for major projects that students might not be able to complete at home due to a lack of supplies.
- Students who are falling behind are placed in a mandatory lunch tutorial (a “lunchorial”) that is staffed voluntarily by teachers who help students on specific assignments for the first 15 to 20 minutes of each lunch hour. The benefits of the program are so great that a constant flow of teachers volunteer to staff the lunch tutorial.
- The Educational Support Period (ESP) meets for 24 minutes on each of the six-period days (the school follows a block schedule two days per week). During ESP, teachers guide students in studying for tests, organizing homework, and getting work completed. The school provides each student with a student planner, and the teachers guide the students in using it as a tool for setting priorities and organizing their time.



The school provides each student with a planner to use as a tool for setting priorities.

Age-Appropriate Cocurricular Activities

In addition to all the fun activities hosted during lunch and all the community service opportunities, BAMS students also have a choice of attending many student-led clubs and activities. Weekly spirit activities take place on stage in the lunch area. Clubs include the Surf Team, Chess Club, Builders Club, Bridges Program, and Youth Action Team. Before- and after-school students are involved in drama, babysitting, guitar, sign language, and dance classes offered through a partnership with the city Community Education Department. The student council sponsors after-school dances, and many sports teams are available after school through the city program. Students can also participate in the annual spring musical, as well as choral and band concerts.

All students participate in a Life Skills course during physical education. It is designed to help students learn decision-making skills.

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Challenges for Staff

The main challenge in running an ambitious, student-focused program like the one at BAMS is to be careful not to overexert or to burn people out. The staff members have learned to weave interventions together to get more support from fewer programs. They are careful to avoid adding too many new programs. Instead, they monitor the success of existing programs and commit to sustaining those in which student participation is high and academic performance is improved. In fact, the only new program BAMS has planned is a Parent-Student Book Club to help parents and students communicate about books on interesting teen topics.

Benefits to Students

Many activities are designed around specific academic content areas that help boost student achievement. For example, students who participated in the school's Literature Workshop experienced more than a year's growth in one school year.

Students also benefit from the active parent involvement and from their parents' knowledge of how to check on homework and how to participate in conferences with the teachers. Parent participation in events such as the Medieval Faire makes it all the more festive.

Students enjoy coming to BAMS. The family atmosphere, fun activities, and close student-adult bonds make school a safe and caring environment. The focus on academic achievement helps the students gain self-confidence when they can see their academic growth.

Getting Results: Health Risk and API Scores

The spring 2005 Healthy Kids report—*Getting Results: Developing Safe and Healthy Kids, Update 5, Student Health, Supportive Schools, and Academic Success*—shows positive correlations between academic achievement and the building blocks of healthy development. The report discusses 40 developmental assets as identified by the Search Institute in 1997 (see <http://www.search-institute.org/>).

In the new Healthy Kids study, researchers examined how API scores were related to three types of health-related barriers to learning: (1) poor physical health indicators, such as lack of exercise and inadequate nutrition; (2) alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use, including use at school; and (3) violence, victimization, harassment, and lack of safety at school. The research demonstrated that each of those types of health risks may be reduced through school-based, programmatic interventions and that each type was related to learning and academic performance:

. . . schools with lower API scores were characterized by relatively large numbers of students who reported high levels of substance use, who used substances or had been offered or sold drugs on school property, who had been threatened or injured with weapons, and who attended schools with high levels of weapons possession. Those schools that have high percentages of students who (1) engage in moderate physical

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activity; (2) eat nutritious food and breakfast daily; (3) feel safe and secure at school; and (4) have high levels of school external assets have higher API scores than do other schools.

The findings indicate that targeted programs, such as school nutrition, drug and alcohol intervention, and school safety interventions, have a positive impact on student achievement. The study also highlighted the positive impacts of high expectations for student achievement, caring relationships, and meaningful participation at school.

Chapter 4 of the study is devoted to recommendations for putting the research into action. The study concludes by stating, "School organizational variables most important to academic success are effective classroom management; quantity of instructional time; positive and productive student/teacher interactions; a classroom climate conducive to learning; and a peer culture supportive of academic achievement."

The complete text of *Getting Results, Update 5* is available on the California Department of Education Web site at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/pn/fd/documents/getresultsupdate5.pdf/>.

Math Score Increase Attributed to the Enhancing Education Through Technology Competitive (EETT-C) Grant

Emerson Middle School's 2005 math score increase is attributed to new technology provided by the EETT-C grant that supports the math and science curriculum.

A fourth-year Program Improvement school, Emerson was selected by Bakersfield Elementary School District to be the recipient of EETT-C funds to develop a technology-integrated math and science program. The goal of the program is to expand community partnerships for increasing students' academic achievement.

The program focus and selected activities appear to be working for students. Math scores for the Emerson students after they spent one year in the program show the following differences:

| Emerson Middle School | | | | |
|---|------------|----------------------------|------------|------------|
| 2004 Math CST ¹ Placement | Percentage | 2005 Math CST Placement | Percentage | Difference |
| Advanced | 1 | Advanced | 2 | +1 |
| Proficient | 9 | Proficient | 12 | +3 |
| Basic | 21 | Basic | 29 | +8 |
| Below Basic | 38 | Below Basic | 35 | -3 |
| Far Below Basic | 31 | Far Below Basic | 21 | -10 |

As Bob Fulenwider, district math program specialist, explains, "This project really helped jump-start the collaboration between the middle grades math and science teachers. The project has been a very positive experience for our district and we are looking at ways to sustain the program to continue our students' progress."

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¹ California Standards Test

Students gathered, analyzed, and presented their data findings. Technology tools that supported students in their investigations included Texas Instruments graphing calculators, Vernier probe attachments, and wireless laptops. Additional technology, such as SmartBoards, InterWrite wireless tablets, and Texas Instrument projection devices, were provided to Emerson Middle School math and science teachers to engage students in the learning process and to check for understanding.

The Emerson Middle School math, science, and technology teachers shared information with parents about the integrated project at the school's Family Technology Night. Emerson students demonstrated their skills to their parents. Parents also had hands-on experience with the same technology that their students were using in the classroom. District Science Program Specialist Cyndy Cannon emphasized that the hands-on investigations incorporated within the project classrooms proved to be a motivating factor for both students and parents.

How They Did It

Bakersfield City Elementary School District, an inner-city school district with close to a 90 percent poverty rate (based on students' eligibility for free and reduced price lunch) was part of the Round 2 (fiscal year 2003-04) funding cycle for the EETT-C grant. The district's comprehensive program, funded through EETT-C, focused on the academic areas of mathematics and science for students in grade seven and incorporated five goals. The goals are as follows: creating and improving technology resources to support the instructional program; expanding connectivity; increasing the effective utilization of emerging technologies; improving technology proficiency skills for administrators, teachers, students, and parents; and expanding community partnerships that promote student achievement.

The district grant included all seventh-grade math and science teachers and their students. The grant will expand to include grade eight and finally grade six. Besides Emerson Middle, the EETT-C funded sites include Chipman Junior High, Compton Junior High, Curran Middle, Sequoia Middle, Sierra Middle, Stiern (Walter) Middle, and Washington Middle schools. The grant was a collaborative effort by the school district; California State University, Bakersfield (CSUB); the local California Technology Assistance Project; Kern County Superintendent of Schools; and Texas Instruments. The grant activities were also a collaborative effort between the math and science teachers who scheduled data collection and data interpretation activities to occur on the same day.

Joe Fiedler, CSUB professor and director of the Mathematics Project in Bakersfield, believes that the EETT-C funded project, besides increasing student achievement, has encouraged a more positive attitude toward curriculum/technology integration at the targeted sites. Dr. Fiedler provided Emerson Middle School teachers with a total of six, eight-hour professional development days of training that targeted pedagogy and technology support. Robert Fulenwider and Cyndy Cannon visited the site frequently and acted as coach-mentors to sustain the learning in the classroom. "Teachers who at first were reluctant to use technology (for example, the graphing calculators) now see this as a supportive tool that can be utilized to isolate skills," Fiedler noted.

Coordination and commitment came from people such as Superintendent Jean Fuller, Technology Program Specialist Lynne Britt, Emerson Middle School Principal Vivian Gayles, classroom teachers, and community partnerships to implement a program that positively impacts teaching and learning. For more information, please contact the Bakersfield City Elementary District at (661) 631-4778.

By Joyce Hinkson, Consultant, Middle and High School Improvement Office

Eight California Middle Schools Win Awards for Exemplary Counseling and Student Support Programs

State Superintendent Jack O'Connell has recognized eight middle schools as the 2005 "**Best in the West**" for providing exemplary counseling and student support programs.

All eight schools provided evidence of meeting the stringent standards of the National Model for School Counseling Programs. The National Model delineates how a comprehensive, school-based student support system can increase achievement, program efficiency, and accountability. It was developed from a 2001 "national summit" of school counselors and is sponsored by the American School Counselor Association. The model provides a common mechanism by which school counseling teams can design, coordinate, implement, manage, and evaluate their programs to maximize student success.

At schools implementing the National Model, counselors "switch their emphasis from service-centered for *some* students to program-centered for *every* student." Under the model, counselors ask themselves, "How are students different as a result of what we do?" Then counselors expect to find significant results.²

California has extended the national model by developing its own Support Personnel Accountability Report Card (SPARC), which provides schools and districts with an accountability structure for their school counseling and guidance programs. The California Department of Education is currently preparing a document titled **Guidelines for a Comprehensive School Guidance and Counseling Program** that will highlight the SPARC as a valuable tool for implementing a comprehensive schoolwide counseling program. The guidelines include components for personal/social, career, and academic areas.

Each year, the California Association of School Counselors (CASC) gives "Academy Awards" to schools with outstanding counseling programs as measured by the SPARC assessment. To compete for the SPARC award, school staffs must complete ten designated areas on the application.

A new "First Step" award is available for those who would like to compete on a shorter application that requires completion of only five designated elements. Application requirements and the full 2005-06 SPARC scoring rubrics are available at <http://www.lacoe.edu/sparc/>.

2005 Best in the West Recipients

Antelope Crossing Middle School

Dry Creek Joint Elementary
School District
Placer County

Edgewood Middle School

West Covina Unified School District
Los Angeles County

Giano Intermediate School

Rowland Unified School District
Los Angeles County

Goddard Middle School

Glendora Unified School District
Los Angeles County

Hollencrest Middle School

West Covina Unified School District
Los Angeles County

Oak Avenue Intermediate School

Temple City Unified School District
Los Angeles County

Pinon Mesa Middle School

Snowline Joint Unified
School District
San Bernardino County

Quail Valley Middle School

Snowline Joint Unified
School District
San Bernardino County

² T. Hatch and J. Bowers, *Blocks to Build On: Elements of ASCA's National School Counseling Programs*. Alexandria, Va.: American School Counselor Association, 2004, p.15.

Schools that receive an “academy award” for three consecutive years are given the highest award—“The Best in the West”—for having an exemplary program of counseling and student support.

In 2005, eight California middle schools received the “Best in the West” designation from CASC.

Middle schools currently complete more SPARC applications than schools at any other level.

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By George Montgomery, Education Programs Consultant

Worth a Click

California Department of Education (CDE) Student Support and Intervention Programs. Link to the following CDE resources for more information about support and intervention programs:

- Attendance Improvement: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ai/>
- Before and After School: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ba/>
- Class Size Reduction: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/cs/>
- Counseling and Student Support: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/cg/>
- Dropout Prevention: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ai/dp/sb65progsumm.asp>
- Educational Options: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/eo/>
- Education Technology: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/cs/>
- English Learners: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/>
- Facilities: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/fa/>
- Foster Youth: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/pf/fy/>
- Health: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/he/>
- Nutrition: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu/>
- Parent/Family/Community: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/pf/>

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- School Libraries: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/lb/>
- School Safety: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ss/>
- Special Education: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/>
- Transportation: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/tn/>
- Youth Development: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/yd/>

CDE Conference Calendar. Identifies statewide and national education conferences and workshops of interest to educators, parents, and students: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/ca/cc/>.

Funding: CDE Administered. Search CDE funding by fiscal year, type, status, topic, keyword(s), or any combination. Use Advanced Search for more choices: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/fo/sf/>.

Funding: Outside the CDE. State, federal, and other funding opportunities administered by agencies outside the CDE: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/fo/of/ap/>.

Virtual Library. Collection of resources that may be helpful for districts that have high-priority schools: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/lp/vl/>.

Join MidNet—the Middle Grades E-mail List!

Join the CDE Middle Grades e-mail list at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/mg/> to receive notices about middle grades-related information and upcoming *Middle Grades Spotlight* periodical issues.

To view current and past *Middle Grades Spotlight* periodical issues, visit:
<http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/pn/nl/mdlgrdsnwsltrs.asp>

Please send your comments or suggestions to MidNet@cde.ca.gov. Your ideas and suggestions are welcome.

Middle Grades Spotlight

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